

A brief intellectual Biography of Alfred Schutz

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Alfred Schutz was born in Vienna April 13, 1899. After graduation, he participated in the First World War as a cadet officer in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He fought on the Italian front on the Piave river, near Conegliano. After the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, the young Schutz found himself before the crisis that hit Austrian society: he wanted to pursue his medical studies or follow an academic career, in addition to being a musician. All three possibilities seemed implausible, due to the lengthy insecurity he would likely encounter (Wagner 1983: 8). As a result, he chose to study law, following courses of international law at the University of Vienna and international trade at the Viennese Academy. Over the course of his university studies, Schutz came into contact with lawyers like Kelsen, economists like von Wieser, von Mises and Machlup, political scientists like Voegelin. Perhaps the key figure for the young Schutz was the mathematician and philosopher Felix Kaufmann, who not only directed him towards a more rigorous methodology, but above all, introduced him to phenomenology and Edmund Husserl.

In the first semester of 1918, Max Weber gave a course at the University of Vienna that had a wide resonance. Schutz was unable to attend because he was still at the front, but he was in contact with students who were struck by that lesson. The influence of Weber had a fundamental impact on the thought of the Austrian sociologist, who studied his work in depth after he finished university. The Weberian theme of the subjectivity of the understanding of meaning constituted a bridge to fill the gap between the technicality of economic theory and the social world (Wagner 1983: 13).

Schutz graduated in law in December, 1921 and began working as managing secretary of the Association of Austrian Bankers. In 1926 he married Ilse Heim, who gave him, Evelyn in 1933, and Georg in 1938. In 1929, he began working as an expert in law and banking with Reitler & Co., a private bank that operated in Central and Eastern Europe. It was also for his intense interpersonal relationships due to his work, that Schutz developed the theme of *comprehension* of the social world, posing the problem of intersubjectivity at the heart of this analysis.

In the twenties Schutz worked on *Theorie der Lebensformen* and *Lebensformen und Sinnstruktur* (the latter unfinished), two texts in which the influence of Bergson's thought emerges. Voegelin was the friend who introduced him to reading the works of the French philosopher. Bergson's idea of the temporality of consciousness was the theme used to develop the Weberian principle of selectivity of meaning. Schutz, «starting from Weber's theory of action, accepted and recasted the phenomenological analysis but, "rethinking" Max Weber, changed it in the Bergsonian sense» (Protti 1995: 18). Nevertheless the voluntary category of intuition of Bergson did not allow him to address the problem of meaning in a radical way. The Bergsonian impasse of the twenties is the result of the realization that ideal-typical access to the social world is methodologically inconsistent with the intuition of Bergson, that this last category is unverifiable and thus basically metaphorical.

The approach to phenomenology in his late twenties, under the guidance of his friend Kaufmann, was motivated by the need to resolve the differences between Bergson's idea of stream of consciousness and the method of Weber which were anything but marginal. This is how Schutz «through the port of phenomenology can tap into the "data" of consciousness through a methodologically controller procedure» (Muzzetto 2006: 319), based on a rigorous theoretical frame. Kaufmann introduced Husserl to Schutz in 1932, the same year of the publication of the book *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der*

sozialen Welt. In Freiburg, where Husserl lived, Schutz met those who would become the main exponents of phenomenology: Dorion Cairns, Eugen Fink, Ludwig Landgrebe. Schutz met Husserl several times, who considered him a strict phenomenologist: «one of the few people who managed to penetrate the deeper meaning of his work» (Wagner 1983: 46). Husserl proposed that he become his assistant but Schutz refused because of his work commitments. The influence of Husserl was indelible, even if the relationship with phenomenology was never uncritical: Schutz immediately had doubts about the possibility of developing a sociological program structured on the idea of a transcendental ego.

In 1938 Schutz was in Paris on business, when Austria was occupied by Nazi Germany. After a year's exile in France, in 1939 he emigrated permanently to the United States, where Reitler had planned the transfer a few years before. In 1943, thanks to contacts with the American phenomenological movement, he became part-time lecturer of sociology at the *New School for Social Research*. In 1952, he obtained the post of *full professor*, which allowed him to leave Reitler to devote himself full time to research and teaching.

The American period is characterized by the influence of pragmatism and Schutz's interest in language as a vehicle typifying the constitution of meaning. The articulation of the theme of *Verstehen* in a key of mundane understanding led the sociologist to finally abandon the transcendental ego of Husserl and replace it with the Mead's theory of the Self. The path to a phenomenology of natural attitude was complete. Two basic points: certainty is not to be found on a transcendental level but in the world of everyday life (certainty "mundane"). The basis of the phenomenology of natural attitude is socio-centric. The subject is "from the beginning" social; the *We-relation* is understood as the basic category of the social world, as Natanson explained it is «the epistemic root of the shared world» (Natanson, 1977).

Reworking, among others, the ideas of James, Mead and Cassirer, he developed the theory of finite provinces of meaning, creating a powerful theoretical and methodological system, in some ways still unsurpassed, which continues to draw sociologists and philosophers alike. The publications of Schutz in the US, from 1940 to 1959, mostly in the form of journal articles have been published in various volumes of the *Collected Papers*. Alfred Schutz died May 20, 1959 of severe heart disease.

The first influences of Schutz's thought

The "phenomenologically oriented" sociology of Schutz has influenced sociological thought to varying degrees. The first vein is that which builds on work done by Schutz's best known pupil Thomas Luckmann. He not only wrote the two volumes of *The Structure of Social World* with Schutz, (more precisely the drafting of the two volumes is due to Luckmann, who reworked Schutz's notes which contained the general structure of the work), but has also published, together with Berger, what is commonly interpreted as a manifesto of phenomenological sociology: *The Social Construction of Reality*, a volume that contributed to making Schutz known worldwide.

The second and more heterodox vein of successors of Schutz is that of Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel. Independent from the current developments of ethnomethodology, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* of Garfinkel is one of the most audacious attempts to develop the thinking of Schutz, and the phenomenological in general, in a radically empirical key. *Method and Measurement* and *Cognitive Sociology* of Aaron Cicourel, however, are two texts in which the thought of Schutz is used, respectively, to develop a critical discourse on the methods of conventional empirical social research and to explain the empirical modes of the use of language in situated contexts.

Maurice Natanson and Helmut Wagner are some of the last students of Schutz who have developed a third approach, the more philosophical social, linked to themes of the *Self*, to intersubjectivity, to categorizations, finite provinces of meaning and to phenomenological methodology.

Currently, an international circle has been constituted, the *Schutz Circle*, that has given a new boost to the line of study opened by Schutz, extending his key of understanding to the whole body of human and social sciences. In this special issue of SMP, some of the authors that have contributed are members of the Schutz Circle, namely Michael D. Barber, Carlos Belvedere, Jochen Dreher, Mototaka Mori, Daniela Lopez, George Sebald, and Chung-Chi You.

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